

Keeping the Faith

I am going through a lull in my career. Or maybe I've been retired and nobody told me. Other than a LORT job which ended eight months ago, I've had a meager assortment of work this year: a couple radio ads, a couple readings, a low-budget movie that will almost certainly never see your multiplex. Part of this is due to my deciding, after considering auditions suggested by my agent, that I would rather carry out my presidential duties by visiting liaison cities for our AEA centennial celebrations. Part of this is my having auditioned for various shows (a couple of them soon to be on Broadway) that I would have very much liked to do and hearing nothing but silence in response -- frequently when I'd been good enough (I thought) to get an offer. Despite this recession in the Wyman economy, I have faith that I will be back on the boards soon.

I bring this topic up not in a bid for sympathy: I am very well aware of how fortunate I have been in my acting career. Indeed, I am one of those actors to whom people say "Oh, you're always working." But of course, I am not "always" working. I do work a lot and luckily I am generally able to pick up enough non-stage work --television, film, radio -- to pay (most of) my bills.

As I have traveled to all the liaison cities for our centennial parties, I am impressed and moved by the commitment of local members and the tenacity with which they are keeping the faith with the business and with AEA. These members do not have my Broadway opportunities -- indeed they don't have my LORT opportunities as the local LORT theatres frequently persist in auditioning actors in New York for their shows. Those smaller theatres that do hire local AEA actors frequently only hire one or two Equity actors per show. The great majority of local acting roles go to non-Equity members.

Now, none of us joined this business because it offered a surefire path to financial security; we did it because of the joy of working together to tell a story, because we love acting or stage managing. So if all that matters to you is calling a show or getting up onstage, and most of the work (or "work") is non-Equity, why wouldn't you stay non-Equity or even turn in your card and go non-union?

Why? Because that card is a hallmark. Having that card means you're a professional actor or stage manager. You belong to an elite cadre, a tiny percentage of the hundreds and hundreds of thousands of wannabe actors. Your card says, "I value myself. If you wish to hire me, you'll have to meet certain standards of compensation and working conditions. I do this for a living."

Yes, yes. I hear your abashed demurrals: "Well, I actually don't make my living onstage; I don't even make my entire living as an actor." That's okay. That's par for the course. (Re-read my column "Mosaic.") And yet, I constantly meet actors who are convinced that most other actors work much more than they do. Maybe you are one such. You may have had (like me) only one job in the last year. Maybe you haven't worked in three years. In five years. You are still a professional actor or stage manager. Keep the faith.

As a professional Equity member, you help the staff by forcing employers who wish to utilize your skills to work with AEA staff to create fair wages and working conditions. Those wages and working conditions help everyone, including non-Equity actors. Conversely, not joining the union or turning in your union card hurts all workers by giving more leverage to the employer.

For almost all of us in AEA, we spend more time not having an AEA job than having one. Looking for work is our default setting. Your paid staff and your unpaid elected leaders are working hard to make that work easier to find (by organizing more of it) and worthy of your

talents (by negotiating the best possible wages and working conditions.) You keep looking for work, we'll keep working for you, and we'll both keep the faith.